



By Dust Nix
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Secretary of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki probably had the Vietnam generation in mind last Wednesday when he spoke of the nation's broken covenant with those who have served us in the armed forces.

"Not upholding these obligations in the past," Shinseki told a House subcommittee, "has left at least one generation of veterans struggling in anonymity for decades. We, who sent them, owe them better."

The retired four-star general knows whereof he speaks. He was wounded in combat in Vietnam in 1966 and again in 1970, and he has seen the shameful way the nation neglected, even abused, his generation of warriors.

But more recent generations of veterans, as well as the aging vets of World War II and Korea, are also part of the picture. And that picture is often not a pretty one: When wars are over, or when an individual soldier's involvement in one of those conflicts comes to an end, the nation has found it all too easy to move on to other things, while military families are left to deal with the wounds -- visible and otherwise -- that are sometimes lifelong.

Rep. Sanford Bishop, a member of Congress who represents this area and is the ranking

Democrat on the subcommittee on military construction and veterans affairs, was among the lawmakers questioning the secretary last week. The topics ranged from an enormous backlog of vet health claims to better services for women vets, but the overall theme was clear: Those who voluntarily do the nation's most dangerous job deserve better.

The VA has more money to work with: Its budget has been increased by \$27 billion since 2007. But it also has more needs -- new veterans of more recent wars, many of whom have faced multiple deployments with the attendant dangers and stresses. And of course the needs of those who served before Afghanistan and Iraq have only increased as those veterans have aged.

There is also the problem that the VA has not yet fully enacted new health and caregiver benefits Congress approved and funded in 2010.

"Our requirements have grown over the past two years as we addressed longstanding issues from past wars and watched the requirements for those fighting the current conflicts grow significantly," Shinseki told the subcommittee. "These needs will continue long after the last American combatant departs Iraq and Afghanistan."

The inadequacies in services and benefits for veterans, in a society that gives devoted lip service to its support for the troops, didn't begin with the current leadership of the VA, or with our current armed conflicts, or with the veterans among us today. It's a old, shameful story that is by now many pages and many years too long.